

Interview with Alan Fisher

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ALAN FISHER

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Q: I want to start out with having Alan give a brief description of his background before he became affiliated with the Agency or its predecessor agencies and institutions, and then we'll take it from there. In the meantime, as I feel that I want to prompt him on particular subjects, I will intervene with a question. Otherwise, I will let him say pretty much what he wants to talk about. So Alan, please begin with a brief bio sketch of your background, and then take it from there.

Biosketch: Alan Fisher

FISHER: I was born in Brooklyn in 1913. I graduated from high school, Brooklyn Technical High School, was going to be a chemical engineer, and changed my mind. I started to work for the New York World Telegram as a freelance photographer, and then after a year of that, was given a job as sports photographer. In 1934 I started with them. Then I became special features and color photographer and general all-around photographer on their staff until 1942. Then I left them because I had a very good job offer to join the staff of the newspaper PM. I was on the staff for two years and did an awful lot of coverage of Army camps. I spent almost one year covering Army camps.

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Then I got a call from Washington from Alexander Murphy, who had been with the AP and had been our photo assignment editor on PM. Al asked me whether I'd go to South America for a six-month contract to work for Nelson Rockefeller's office. At that time, Nelson was the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. It was equivalent to modern-day Assistant Secretary for Latin America, but there was no such title at that time.

So I said I didn't know whether I could get a leave of absence, and he said, "Sure, we can arrange it with Ralph Ingersoll," the publisher. They arranged it, and I arranged then to go to South America. The interesting thing was that I was given just general ideas on what was wanted, and then I went to Washington on my way to Miami to pick up the plane to Brazil, which was my starting point. I said, "Any final instructions? Specifically what do you want?"

Fisher Goes to South America as Photographer for Rockefeller's IIA Program

It was an assignment of a lifetime. Al Murphy said, "Just take anything that looks good to you." And those were my instructions for Latin America. I spent two years instead of two months in Latin America on a contract for Nelson Rockefeller, and I photographed Brazil, basically the war effort, industry, prominent people, politicians, and so forth.

I went over to Chile after a year and a half, was sent over to Chile to cover the break in relations with the Axis, and after three months there, I was fortunate in getting there in time to cover the break. Florence came with me as my interpreter. She spoke Spanish, I didn't. Then she went back to Brazil, and Vice President Wallace came down to visit Latin America. I was assigned by Washington to cover him for the combined American press. I spent a month with him, then went back to Chile for a month, and then back to Brazil. By that time, I had been reclassified to be 1A, and I got a call from Washington. I said, "I'll be right back."

Q: 1A meaning in the draft.

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FISHER: Yes. I had been 2B, essential war worker. The day I got back to the States, they decided that men over 29 were not wanted anymore, particularly married men, and I was automatically reclassified to 2B again.

I was given a choice then of going back to Brazil or going over as a war correspondent with the Brazilian Expeditionary Force.

Q: At this point, let me ask a couple of questions to clarify exactly what you were doing with the Nelson Rockefeller program, the IIA program. Were you doing entirely photographic work in connection with things Brazilian, or were you trying to get out any information about the United States and its relationship with Brazil?

Fisher's Role in US War Effort Pictures for Publication in US to Acquaint US With Latin America And Have US Stories Played Back to Latin America

FISHER: My job was strictly a one-way job. I was photographing and writing stories to send back to the United States to acquaint the Americans with Latin America. Because at that time, the war wasn't going too well, and our fallback position was Latin America. We were doing a lot of things in Latin America to help the Latin Americans, such as helping them build a steel plant out of Rio, bringing in equipment for them to manufacture airplane motors, heavy equipment, tractors, and so forth, raising the level of food production, and trying to raise the health standards. We were doing this all throughout Latin America, and one of the things I was to do was to photograph this effort, write stories and send them back. The Agency would then distribute them through the wire services, so they were getting a great play. But this really was a fallback position for us. In the event that we did get driven out of the States, we would fall back to Latin America. [Editor's underscoring. It is not thought that the American public ever knew of this possible fallback consideration.] So there was some strategic importance to what I was doing, but it was all the other way. In other words, I wasn't disseminating any information about the United States in Latin America.

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I was also covering stories for the two slick magazines that the coordinating office put out in Latin America, EM/GUARDA, which is in Brazil and Portuguese, and EM/GUARDA, which was in Spanish for the rest of Latin America. That was really much like the forerunner of Life magazine, the same format, big slick color, a very, very good-looking publication, and a very popular magazine in Latin America. So that carried stories of the American war efforts and battles and American military activity.

Q: Did you write any of those stories?

FISHER: No. No, my pictures were used for that. They were in-house stories out of Washington, but there many of my pictures used for that.

Then when I went back, I went back to Washington, and there was a hiatus. I thought I would like to get into the military, because I had been offered a commission as a captain before I left for Latin America. Those positions were no longer available.

Fisher Becomes US Government Employee Covering Italy: 1944

But just at that time, then, I was asked to come back to the Agency, this time as a CAF-12, which was an information publicist. I did, and went over to Italy as a war correspondent, as a government employee.

Q: Since USIA, per se, was not yet in existence, was this the part of the Office of War Information?

FISHER: No, it was the Latin American completely separate operation. It was the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.

Q: Still under the Rockefeller program.

FISHER: Still under the Rockefeller program. We went through several name changes. We at one time became the Office of Information and Culture, and one or two other names

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that were just short-lived. But it was the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs still under Nelson Rockefeller's office. Nelson would make periodic visits to Latin America, and he was treated as an Assistant Secretary of State would be now, very popular there.

But we had some very interesting people who worked there. Frank Jamison, who was an old AP man, was in charge of the press operation of the coordinator's office. Bill Cody was cultural officer in Asuncion, Paraguay, when I went to Brazil. I was supposed to see Bill. The funny thing about that was that when I was in New York on the World Telegram, I was writing an occasional Saturday column about photography, and I got a call from a Bill Cody, who at that time was editing, among other things, a Knott Hotel publication for the Knott Hotel chain, and asked me if I would do a monthly column for them on what to photograph in New York. I arranged to do it, but Bill hadn't paid me for the last column I did. It was ten bucks. So when I was given a list of people that I was to contact, as I was to go around Latin America, Bill Cody's name showed up. I wrote him and I said, "Are you the guy who owes me ten bucks?" (Laughs)

And he said, "I'm the guy who knows you, but I don't owe you ten bucks." (Laughs) I never got the ten bucks, by the way.

But later on, I worked for Bill when he was PAO in Paris, when I was transferred to Paris. It's interesting to see how the old CIAA guys became part of the Agency, because in 1947 we were all taken in, and then it became one big agency with a lot of OWI guys.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, because I went over to Italy as a war correspondent for the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, again to show the United States and Brazil what one of our South American allies was doing in the war. I spent a year with them. I was strictly photographing at that time, and there were four foreign correspondents with the expeditionary force. There was Frank Norall, who was Coordinators Office type, along with me, and Henry Bagley of the Associated Press, and Chico Hallowell of the BBC, who was

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really an Anglo-Brazilian. He was doing recording. So the four of us lived together for a year.

Q: What was his last name?

FISHER: Hallowell. Chico Hallowell, a very nice Englishman who later became an employee of Met Vickers in Brazil. His first name is Francis, but among the Brazilian troops, he was Chico. He identified himself as, "This is Chico Hallowell of the BBC."

In those days, the BBC had developed a small battery-operated portable disk recorder. It weighed about 15 or 20 pounds, and was very reliable. Frank Norall was trying to do tape recordings with an old G.E. wire recorder, and I was his technician for that. I tell you, working with a wire recorder—! the wire would break and the whole thing would spin out. You must know those things.

Q: I had one.

End of War; Back to Brazil: 1945

FISHER: Yes. (Laughs) But it was a very interesting time. At any rate, I spent a year with them, and after the war, went directly back to Brazil in 1945.

Q: Again with the Agency?

FISHER: As a CAF-12 and went back as a CAF-12.

Mrs. FISHER: It was '45.

Mrs. Fisher Expecting Baby. No Baby Clothes Available. Vernon "Dick" Walters, Then a Major, Becomes Baby Clothes Buyer

FISHER: It was '45. Yes. Then still as a CAF-12. We were not Foreign Service. I went back to the embassy. This time I was still a photographer and I was an assistant attach#.

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I worked in the press section rewriting stuff and so forth. Then Florence came back and joined me. Then Florence became pregnant, and there was no way I could get baby clothes. We had no APO privileges. We were the poor relations over at the coordinator's office.

I knew a young captain in the military attach#s office from before the war, and during the war he was the interpreter and aide to General Mascarenhas de Moraes, who was the head of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force. His name was Vernon Walters. Mascarenhas de Moraes then became marshal of the Brazilian Army. But I knew Vernon Walters, who was Dick Walters. Everybody called him Dick. Dick served as assistant military attach# in Rio before the war. After the war, came back as a major, also as assistant military attach#, and I saw Dick. I said, "Dick, I've got a problem. Florence is pregnant and I've got to get some baby clothes. If I order some baby clothes from Macy's, can I have them sent to you by APO?"

He said, "Sure." Well, we ordered a whole bunch of baby clothes, and we waited and waited and waited for them to arrive. The baby was just about due, and we hadn't gotten them.

Mrs. FISHER: The women at the embassy were taking up a collection.

FISHER: Yes, the women at the embassy were taking up a collection for Florence to buy baby clothes, donate them, because baby clothes in Brazil were very expensive and you couldn't find anything. So finally, I went to see Dick, and I said, "Hey, Dick, what the hell ever happened to those baby clothes that I was having sent to you?"

He said, "What baby clothes?"

I said, "Remember you said I could order baby clothes for Florence? She's pregnant, she's going to have a baby."

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"Oh!" he said. "Those were yours?" He said, "They came a month or so ago, and I didn't know what they were. I opened them, and when I took out baby clothes, everybody in the office said, 'Hey, Dick, what have you been doing?'" (Laughs) He's a bachelor. So I finally got the baby clothes, but it was a great gag around that office for a long while.

Q: In fact, he never did marry.

FISHER: No, he didn't.

Q: A lifelong bachelor.

1947: Into the Foreign Service Difficulty of Operating Overseas Information Service Under Department of State Mobile Unit Field Program in Brazil

FISHER: That's right. Then in '47, the Foreign Service Act took us all in under the Foreign Service umbrella, and I became motion picture officer at the embassy. That was to distribute USIS films. Now, that's an interesting situation, because before that, we became the United States Information Service. Regardless of what we were called in Washington, we were USIS abroad.

Q: Always that way, throughout the world.

FISHER: Always that way. We were then taken into the State Department, which really was a very restrictive time for us, because we did an awful lot of things. If you recall, in order for a State Department or Foreign Service officer to get ahead, he could get ahead if he never made any decisions, because he might make a wrong one. Whereas USIS stuck their necks out all the time. There were never any administrative procedures for us to operate. I remember we were operating mobile units in Brazil and there was no way that I could get an advance for a local employee to send him on a trip. I personally had to advance him the money. When he came back, he turned in his voucher, he would collect it, and he'd give the money back to me.

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Q: In sending out the mobile units, to which locations did you send them, and exactly what were they showing? Just showing pictures, or were you carrying on a general informational program at whatever points you were operating?

FISHER: We had different objectives depending upon where you were in Brazil. In the first place, we had mobile units wherever we had roads on which to operate. Now, this was back in the late Forties, and the roads in Brazil, the road from Rio to Sao Paulo frequently got washed out. It was a dirt road. I once had two mobile units up on that road that were stuck for about three weeks. They couldn't move, along with trucks that couldn't get through and so forth.

We were doing a lot of health work in Brazil at that time, working with local authorities to try to raise the health standards. We had a series of Walt Disney cartoons on health, which were made specifically for the coordinator's office, and they were extremely helpful because they were simple. There was one I recall, on building an outdoor privy. We showed it along a railroad right away and up in an area in Minas Gerais, which is a neighboring state to Rio. We showed this film and then lent the films to the various health organizations up there. It was very interesting that several years later, people would come back and report that they had seen these little Disney latrines all over the place. (Laughs)

Q: Selling America to Latin America.

FISHER: That's right. But we did things. For example, remember there was no television in those days, so we were the big entertainment feature in the interior. We had mobile units that had generators, had light stringers and public address systems, and we'd send them off into the interior on a tour. They would pull into a town where there was no electricity, and there wasn't much in the rural areas in those days.

The first call would be on the mayor and say they were just going to show films in their town and hoped he would be present. He said he would, always. They would put up light

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stringers in the public square. There was always a public square. Then they'd go around town with a public address system on a truck and say, "As soon as it gets dark, we're going to have movies in the public square." Just about everybody in the town would show up. They'd start the generators and light up the public square, and the people would see their square lit at night for the first time in their lives. Then they would show films. A lot of these were health films, some were newsreels. We were getting 16-millimeter copies of the MGM newsreels from the States. Some were just other instructional films, or maybe a travelogue on the States, a tour by Greyhound bus. We had many films, and they were all in the Portuguese language so that the people understood what they were seeing.

Reactions were varied. I have photographed a number of these, did some special reports on them, and have pictures of people on horseback, watching the movies. I had a report of someone who got so excited when he saw a newsreel of Hitler, he pulled out a pistol and shot at the screen. (Laughs) Wonderful things like that happened!

But the interesting thing is that these towns, if they had a movie theater, it was operated with a portable generator, and always 16-millimeter. One of the things that the operators were always instructed to do was to make sure that they were not giving any competition to the local operator. They would check with the movie theater owner who, in most cases, would say, "I have this film. I'm showing it for a week. I don't get anybody anyway. I'll shut down my theater tonight and you can have the entire audience." And they would do that, so that we would get full cooperation from the town. So they just loved us to come and show films. Again, I say, no television. That was the only entertainment they had.

Q: Would you just say a word about what the nature of the mobile unit was at that time? Was it fairly primitive in terms of what we had later on? What was included in it, and were they especially built for that purpose?

FISHER: The first mobile units Brazil got were Delahaye units.

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Q: *From France.*

The French Delahaye Mobile Unit: Its Trials and Tribulations

FISHER: From France. They were purchased with counterpart funds. We had—I think it was nine of them at that time, and they all ran very well for the first month or so, but then they broke down. We had no spare parts for them. They consisted of generators that worked off the drive shaft, and they were capable of powering a projector and an amplifier and lighting up the public square. They were fitted out for projectors and transformers and screens, even carried a thermos water bucket for the operators to take with them in the interior, where the water supply was unsafe. But they were very well equipped. The only problem was that there were no tires for them, there wasn't a single spare part. You couldn't even get a headlight lamp. I, at one time, had seven out of nine broken down, awaiting spare parts. There was a really bad supply.

Q: *We had the same problem in Japan. They sent us about 15 or 20 of those things because we had 24 field posts, and they were all Delahayes. In some of the field posts, the Center directors were women, and to see some of these little women about 4'11" trying to herd these Delahayes around was really something. We couldn't get spare parts or tires either.*

FISHER: Yes. It was a very bad time for us. We also had German generators, portable generators that were fairly good. We had French screens that were never any good; they always had a big bend in them and they wouldn't lie flat. But we muddled through. Fortunately, we were using American projectors, and they stood up well. We got supplies. Victor Projector, I'm sure you had that, too. Victor had a good supply line.

One thing I must say, that when it came to that type of support from the motion picture service, they were very good. Willis Warren was in charge of that end of it. He was good. If we needed a mechanic to come down to work with our mechanic, they would send a

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mechanic from Victor down to train our people. Very good in that respect. So the motion picture service was a very good one.

USIS Films on Brazilian TV

Then when television started in Brazil, our films were very popular on television. It was only then that they began to worry about television rights for them. I remember we had a television station start in Rio, and I discussed with the general manager the use of our films. He said, "We need material. We don't have any material. Can we use your stuff?"

I said, "Well, I don't have rights for you to show on television, but I don't have a television set. So if you borrow them and show them on television, I don't know whether you'd use them or not, because I can't see them. If someone complains, I'll have to bring the films back." That's the arrangement we worked by. But we felt, "Wow, we got in on the ground floor with television." But we learned that as soon as that space that we were using our films for became salable, we were out. And that's the history of television with our films. If that space is salable, either we buy it to show or somebody buys it to sponsor our film, but it doesn't get on for nothing.

Two Mopix Officers from Washington Visit Rio

One interesting story was that I had ordered an American jeep for use in the interior, and it came without a top. Shortly afterwards, I had the visit of two men from the motion picture service in Washington, Harry Keith—you know Harry very well; he was your motion picture officer in Japan—and Doug Baker.

Q: I know Doug, too.

FISHER: Doug is now a dependent husband. (Laughs) Well, they came down to visit me, and they had visions of sitting around on the beach in Copacabana. I said, "No, I'm going to set up a trip for them in that jeep that the motion picture service sent me without a top."

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So they arrived and I gave them a day of rest, and then I took them off into the interior in that jeep, with no top, and it started to rain. They complained. I said, "Boys, you didn't send me a top." (Laughs) Well, they came down and I had them out there for four or five days. Harry Keith came down with a terrible cold. Doug weathered it well. Finally, when I put them on the plane to go back, they said, "Alan, you can bet nobody's ever going to come down to check your operation again." (Laughs) Motion picture work was very interesting.

Q: At that point, you were not producing any films yourself, were you?

FISHER: Not at that point, but shortly thereafter, when Frank McArdle was information officer at the embassy, a wonderful guy, Frank had a long history of McCann Erickson, and I knew Frank from the early days of the coordinator's office, when Dick Hipplehouser was the head of the office. Connie Eagan was there and Jack Wiggin or Johnny Wiggin, and Frank McArdle, Francis J. McArdle were both our radiomen. After he was info officer there, he then went to PAO Sao Paulo, then went as PAO Lisbon, where we visited them later on. We were very good friends.

Q: Hadn't he been previously with one of the major ad agencies?

FISHER: McCann Erickson, yes, in Africa. I don't remember where it was.

Mrs. FISHER: South Africa.

The Birth of USIS Inspired Brazilian News Reels Dive in Visiting US Submarine Health Program in the Amazon

FISHER: South Africa, yes. Frank suggested to me—"Mac" we called him—"Why don't you get into some local production here? I think we can get some money for it."

When I was a photographer in Rio, I knew all the local photographers and the newsreel men, and there was one newsreel outfit that was a good one. They put out the best

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newsreel in Brazil, and their chief photographer was a good friend of mine. So I got together with him and I said, "How about let's doing a few documentaries?"

He said, "Fine." And we did, for example, the SS Trigger. The submarine Trigger came on a goodwill trip to Brazil, and we did a documentary on that. I took Herbert aboard the submarine, and we made a dive, so that Herbert could show that the gauge is registering depth and so forth.

Q: Was that his surname or was that his first name?

FISHER: Herbert Richers.

Q: Oh, yes. He was the one with whom Turner Shelton later was dealing for some major film activities in Brazil.

FISHER: Through me, yes.

Q: Through you.

FISHER: Yes. We had a great program going, but this one particular time when we went down in the submarine, when we came up, we had made arrangements with a Brazilian Navy tug to meet us 30 miles out, because the Trigger was on her way back to the States. The Brazilian Navy tug was going to meet us at a pre-arranged spot 30 miles out, take us off, and bring us back. We surfaced, and there was no tug. We waited for a while. No tug. We saw a Brazilian fishing boat, so we headed towards it, and the guy started to zigzag. He thought we were chasing him. He zigzagged all over the place, and finally we stopped him. We said, "What are you afraid of?" He said, "I thought you were going to attack me." And I learned that the way to avoid it is to zigzag. We finally made a deal with him for \$75 to take us back, so we transferred to that little fishing boat, off went the sub, and we went back. Halfway back, we met the tug coming out for us, but we were already halfway back. We stayed on the boat.

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Q: Had you already made the dive by that time?

FISHER: Yes, we finished the dive. We finished the film.

Another time we were doing a film, I took Herbert up to the Amazon to do a film on the health program up there. We were out on the Amazon, going upriver to visit some of the little hospitals that our joint health service had built with the Brazilians.

Q: Was this an AID project?

FISHER: No, it was SPHS, special public health service. It was funded jointly by US and Brazil, and it was a very good program. It operated in many hospitals in communities along the Amazon River, plus other areas in Brazil.

Mrs. FISHER: They were giving malaria medication.

FISHER: They were doing malaria on occasion, which the Rockefeller Foundation had done a lot of before, but they were attending to the needs of the sick, mostly malaria, and dispensing a lot of Atabrine and so forth. We were up on the Amazon, and Herbert thought he might use the gangplank as a water ski. (Laughs) And dropped the gangplank over and rode it, got his hand tangled up in the rope and dislocated his wrist. We kept quiet about it. We finally managed to get it fixed up at the next hospital we stopped at. Mrs. FISHER: Boys will be boys.

FISHER: But we tried to hide the fact that it happened, but the captain told, and we were admonished for our frivolousness. At any rate, we did a pretty good film on that.

Then later, a year or so later, we got into another operation which was a classified operation, and I don't know whether we get into that here or not, but it was a good one. Herbert Richers then became a big-time motion picture producer.

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Q: Alan, you mentioned a confidential project that you wondered whether we should put on tape or not for various reasons. I think I would like to record it at this point. It was apparently done confidentially at the request of the Brazilians and not the US Government, and it may be that even now it shouldn't be released. So I would like you to put the story on tape, and then I will check it out. If it still is considered advisable to delete it, we will delete it from the final draft.

Arrangements For On-Going Newsreel ProductionPartly USIS Funded

FISHER: This was a newsreel operation which Herbert Richers, the cameraman, and I started. Again, it was at Frank McArdle's encouragement that I was doing this, and I proposed to Herbert that he start a newsreel of his own, and that we would finance a good part of it, and the rest of the financing he could have through theater rentals, or if he wanted to sell parts of it the way the regular newsreel operated, it would be okay with us.

So Herbert started a newsreel which was basically a good newsreel with a lot less materia paga, which the Brazilians call "paid material" in it, which the newsreels in those days were loaded with. If you wanted a story in a newsreel, you could get anything in a newsreel, provided you paid for it.

Our stories, we were to have at least one story a week in the newsreel which was a pro-American story. It might be a project we were working on in Brazil, it might be something we wanted to bring in on international news. Whatever it was, Herbert ran it. Then he was always to look for other stories for the reel which would reflect well upon the Americans or support some basic American policy. Herbert and I would meet every week for lunch. We'd go over the makeup of the newsreel, determine what was being done, I would approve the script, and it would go out to theaters. He released in every major city in Brazil. Unlike many Brazilians reels which played (I've seen newsreels in Brazil in the interior five years old), his, within something like three weeks, were out of circulation. So that his reel was a fresh reel, and people really liked it. They looked forward to it. This, again, was

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before television, so the reel was like our newsreels in the States. I brought equipment in for him, I brought in sound effects, and even sent him up to the States once for some special training. But it was a very successful project and it continued up until the time I left. Shortly thereafter, I believe the ambassador objected to this classified operation and it was stopped. I don't really know.

Q: It went on even after you left.

FISHER: Yes.

Q: By that time, Turner Shelton was claiming responsibility and credit for it, and he was making a couple of trips to Latin America to talk with Herbert Richers, broadcasting his particular role in the operation.

FISHER: Yes.

Q: It went on at least as long as I was there, which wasn't too long, because I had to come out, having gotten polio.

FISHER: Yes. A one-man epidemic, wasn't it?

Q: Yes, an epidemic in Rio. There were some in Sao Paulo, but I was the only one in Rio.

FISHER: On that particular project, I had marvelous support from Washington, I must say. Turner was very supportive and Ada Pimpleton. Do you remember Ada?

Q: Yes, I remember Ada.

FISHER: Ada was head of the foreign production operation then and was good. Ada gave me all the support I needed. It was a pleasure to operate under such conditions.

Mrs. FISHER: Do you remember that little country boy?

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FISHER: Yes, Turner Shelton, that little country boy. (Laughs)

Q: Stories of Turner are legion, and I will recount a few off the record later, but not now.

FISHER: I have a few myself.

Q: I'm sure you do.

FISHER: I have one interesting story, jumping ahead when we were in Paris. They had transferred me to Paris. Turner wouldn't eat anything. He came to my house, and I had to make scrambled eggs for him. Finally, I arranged with the embassy restaurant, we had a lovely embassy cafeteria, restaurant, which served dinner if you made arrangements for it. I talked with the manager, and I said, "Bob, I got my big boss from Washington coming, and all he'll eat is steak and he won't eat any salad, just steak and potatoes and bread.

He said, "But I will make a salad for him. We'll wash everything. If we serve it at the embassy, it's okay."

So we persuaded Turner and his wife, Leslie, to come to dinner with us at the embassy restaurant. Well, we sat down, and Turner looked around and said, "Yes, this really looks like a good American place." Just at that moment, I happened to look at his salad, and on the other side of Turner's dish, a big caterpillar crawled off his salad. (Laughs)

Mrs. FISHER: A worm!

FISHER: I grabbed it before he saw it and threw it on the floor. (Laughs)

I was motion picture officer and assistant attach# and assistant information officer of motion pictures, and I was that until 1955, when I guess Jack Vebber was PAO at that time.

Q: Yes, he was.

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FISHER: They needed someone to go to Lima, Peru, as acting PAO because Tom Driver was being transferred to Karachi urgently. So they looked around and said, "Whose operation can do without him for a while?" and they sent me over as acting PAO for three months to Lima. It was a wonderful experience, a wonderful experience. I worked with Ellis Briggs.

Q: Who later became ambassador to Brazil.

FISHER: Yes. He was a very nice guy. We had daily staff meetings, and I was able to learn a lot about the whole operation and make some changes in it, which I felt it needed. But I spent three months there, and Florence and Stephanie came over to join us. We went to Machu Picchu. Then they went back, and later on at the end of three months, I went back to Brazil again. Then got transferred to Paris.

The interesting thing about that was that a year before my transfer, Bill Clark, who was area director, had come to Brazil and had said to me, "Turner wants to transfer you to Paris. He's got problems there and he thinks you could settle them."

I was really getting into the operations with Herbert Richers at that time. And I said, "Give me another year, but don't tell Florence that you asked me." (Laughs)

He said, "I won't." And Florence never knew for a year that I could have gone a year earlier. But then I was transferred directly to Paris.

Transfer to Paris: 1955

Q: Was Bill Clark by that time head of the European operation?

FISHER: Yes.

Q: So he transferred you to Paris when he became head of the European operation.

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FISHER: Yes, with Bill Cody. I never did collect the ten bucks. (Laughs) But I was all set to go. We were all going by ship when I got a call. It was a direct transfer. I got a call from Turner Shelton, saying he wanted to see me in Washington first, so I had to fly up. Then I spent a couple of days in Washington, then flew over and met Florence and Stephanie when they arrived by boat train from Nice.

Problems in Mopix Operation in Paris

I had a problem in Paris, in that Bill O'Brien—do you remember Bill O'Brien? Bill O'Brien was a wonderful Boston Irishman who was Jack Conolly's assistant in New York. Jack Conolly was a wonderful, wonderful person. I worked for Jack in New York during the time that we had a RIF. I left that out, I guess, didn't I?

Q: Let's fix the date on which you transferred to Paris.

FISHER: I transferred to Paris in June of 1955.

Q: Just as the other side of this tape ended, you made a couple of remarks that I think were probably cut off. Would you repeat them now so that we can pick up the sequence?

FISHER: Turner wanted me to go to Paris as motion picture officer because he had problems there. It seems that Bill O'Brien had been motion picture officer there, and Bill was a wonderful, burly type. He had worked with Jack Conolly, who had been head of—I guess it was Pathe Newsreel in Paris, when talkies first came in. Jack was a wonderful, wonderful person. Bill O'Brien had been one of his contact men. A newsreel contact man was personality plus, always, they all were. Bill O'Brien had been motion picture officer, and they had a pretty sophisticated staff in Paris that really were very snobbish. Bill tried to cut through it and they cut him down. So Bill left and I arrived.

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Turner said to me, "When you get to Paris, you look over that situation and you do whatever you think you have to do. Talk to Bill Cody about it, he knows all about it." So I talked with Bill Cody, who was PAO then.

Q: Was this the American staff?

FISHER: The American staff was cutting him [Bill O'Brien] down. They could be very snobbish. They were all Francophiles, and they all spoke French well. If someone came along who didn't speak it well, they really had it in for him. All their staff meetings were conducted in French.

Q: This was the part of the thing that enraged Tom Sorensen when he was taking off after the European contingent.

FISHER: Yes. Hal Kaplan was there. He was information officer. Keith Bowman was deputy. Then John Mowinckel—I can't remember whether it was Keith Bowman or John Mowinckel followed, but at any rate, I talked with Bill Cody, and he said, "There's a mess here." I'll just repeat, in effect, "You do whatever you think you have to do, that's all."

I found the situation whereby they had a contract with a French film distributor who was paid \$40,000 a year to distribute USIS 16-millimeter films in French, and he distributed them very much the same as we distributed them in Latin America, only he charged for them. So he was getting money from us, and he was charging admission from the French farmers and rural people, where they were showing the films, something like 50 cents admission to these things. It went against everything that I had ever learned about how to distribute our informational films. I couldn't understand why we were paying him \$40,000 a year for a contract. The reports that came in were very inflated, I could see that by looking at them. Finally, after six months or so, I just said, "I'm going to cancel your contract." The guy was devastated. I said, "I don't see why we should pay you." Well, he agreed with me and still kept using the films, and we just saved 40,000 bucks a year. But that's

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the way they operated, because they still had the old ECA mentality, where they paid for everything. It was a very interesting situation.

This was a Frenchman who happened to be cutting off the rind of his Camembert cheese at the time I told him of this decision, and he was so agitated, he ate the rest of it with the rind and all. (Laughs)

In Paris, it was pretty much of a set operation, distribution. I did meet a couple of film producers there. One, a member of my staff, was Philippe de Fels, who was my chief local. He brought in a friend of his one day and he said, "Monsieur Fisher, I would like you to meet my friend Jean Claude Bourdier."

So I said, "Oh, very nice to meet you, Jean Claude." And he said, "Monsieur Fisher, you will have to excuse me because I do not speak English very well."

So my assistant then said, "No, Jean Claude does not speak English very well."

So Jean Claude said, "I do not speak English very well." (Laughs) I'll never forget that one! He stood corrected, wrongly.

Then I met an American film producer by the name of Tom Rowe, Thomas L. Rowe, who proposed that we do a film on the American Ballet which was coming to Paris. I made a proposal which Turner Shelton bought, and Tom and Florence and I went to Berlin to see the American Ballet Theater there and set up the arrangements for Paris, came back, and when they came to Paris, Tom was all set. We had a contract with them, and did a very nice film on the American Ballet Theater's Western Symphony.

Mrs. FISHER: The music was by Hershey Kaye.

FISHER: Hershey Kaye. A very, very good film which I'm sure is still in the library. We did another film in Paris on Kid Orry, a wonderful old-time trombone player in the early

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days. It was a very sensitive film that Tom did, and that then became a good film within the Agency. We had an awful lot of films in the Agency that were pretty dull.

Q: Yes, we did.

FISHER: And these two films really were entertainment films. Kid Orry was a black that went way back to, I guess, Kid Oliver and the old New Orleans days. A very interesting film.

Q: After you canceled the contract with this Frenchman who was distributing your films, did you then operate your own mobile units, or how did you get your stuff out into the countryside?

FISHER: He operated mobile units. He still continued. He took our films free.

Q: I see.

FISHER: He did it without pay.

Q: Without being paid, and just got his money by charging the people who saw the pictures.

FISHER: Sure. It was a very interesting situation. We had been paying and hadn't needed that.

After I'd been there about a year or so, 1956, then in '57, I guess it was, Bill Cody asked me whether I would take over the supervision of the print shop and the photography operation. We were doing a lot of work in both. We had a big print shop. I had had a little experience in it because Florence's father, my father-in-law, had an offset printing plant in Los Angeles, and we used to go back there on leave. It had always interested me. I had just a smattering of experience, and Bill asked me if I would take it over. I said, "Yes, but I'll have to learn a lot about it." That was in addition to my regular duties.

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So just about that time, Turner sent a telegram saying I was needed in Saigon because Charlie Mertz was leaving Saigon and they needed someone to come in and work that end of it.

1957: "Mr. Fisher Goes to Saigon"

Q: Did Charlie Mertz replace you in Brazil?

FISHER: Yes. You know, by the way, an interesting thing about Mertz. He was very well liked in Brazil. He carried an attach# case to and from work, and this I learned later, the locals told me, and they referred to that as the frigorifico, the deep freezer. I said, "Why?" They said, "Because Mr. Mertz would put stuff in there and it would never come out." (Laughs) Put papers in there, you know, communications that would never come out.

When this communication came through, Bill Cody sent a telegram back saying that I was needed, I was taking over new responsibilities. Turner said, "I'm sorry, but I need him out there," which made me feel pretty good, of course.

I went out there on TDY. Charlie was a great, great organizer, terrific. He could organize things, but there never was a paper trail of anything he did—never. Later on, when I became chief of foreign productions in Washington, I wanted to start an operation in Nigeria, and I said, "The guy to start it is Charlie." I put him out there for two years, got him organized, and then pulled him back and put somebody in to clean up after him and get it administratively set, because he could organize it great.

When I got to Saigon, I found a very good operation, but it was very difficult for me because there was nothing on paper. But it was a very interesting experience because that was the largest operation we had in motion pictures in the world. We had our own production staff of cameramen, editors, writers, directors. All the cameramen were Vietnamese and they were good. The writers and directors were Filipinos. When I got out there, Chet Opal then became PAO, and I talked to Chet and I said, "Chet, I really can't

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produce films unless I can also have the distribution, because I have to know what I'm distributing to. I can't produce them and hope somebody's going to distribute them." There was a young officer there handling motion picture distribution who hadn't handled it before, and Chet said, "Great, because you have the experience in distribution, so you take it." Pat Green was the young officer who was handling distribution. "He needs some instruction." So Pat then became my assistant for distribution. Charlie was putting out a 16-millimeter newsreel for mobile unit operation, and really, it was a newsreel put out for the Vietnamese Ministry of Information. I had met the minister, I worked very closely with him and with his staff, and I proposed to Washington that we continue a 16-millimeter print distribution, but we go to 35-millimeter theatrical distribution. We'd distribute in 35 initially. I said, "That way we really get a picture of tremendous impact." So they approved it, and I immediately then started to distribute in 35mm weekly, opening on Thursday night at the theaters. We were opening at every major theater in Vietnam in 35-millimeter. That was like Paramount newsreel in the States.

Q: This was after Dien Bien Phu?

FISHER: Oh, yes.

Q: You were doing it for South Vietnam because the North had already separated.

Objective of Mopix in Vietnam

FISHER: Yes. We were doing it for South Vietnam, and we had three objectives, basically: to support President Ngo Dinh Diem, to tell what USOM, the operation mission, was doing in Vietnam, and to support other American policy objectives through news clips which we brought in. So theoretically, I was to check every newsreel with the Minister of Information, but after checking with him a few times, he said, "You know what you're doing. Don't bother me with it."

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So we put it out under their name. It was released in 37 theaters first run in Vietnam, all over South Vietnam, and very effective. I had two cameramen everywhere President Ngo Dinh Diem went. We had two cameramen with him. We always had a story of him, and that's the way they knew him. Remember this was before television, so they knew him through the newsreels. I think it was a very effective way of doing it.

Q: It didn't keep him from being overthrown, however.

FISHER: No, it didn't. He was a nice guy, you know.

Mrs. FISHER: He was not overthrown; he was murdered.

FISHER: Yes. Incidentally, an aside. Wes Fischel was the head of the United States Operation Mission at that time. He used to breakfast with Ngo Dinh Diem every morning and they'd work out a program for the day. We saw Wes in Washington when he got back. He'd left the service. He was a contractor. He came to the house for dinner one night, and we were talking about perils of living in the Far East. He said, "You know, I spent something like 18 years in the Far East, and I had stomach troubles all the time I was there. Because of these troubles, my diet consisted of just white rice and tea." He said, "You know, I just went through a series of allergy tests and they discovered I'm highly allergic to white rice." (Laughs)

To get back to Saigon, it was a good operation. We had a contract with USOM to produce 48 reels of documentaries for them a year. I was there on TDY at this time. Then at the end of this period, I went back to Washington. I had written a long report to Turner while I was there. When I got back to Washington, Turner came over and came out to the house for breakfast one morning. As we were having breakfast, he said, "How would you like to transfer to Vietnam?" And I got a terrible kick in the shins from Florence under the table.

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I said, "I would like it. I would like it." Because it was exciting, it was fun. Professionally, it was great.

Q: How long were you there on TDY?

FISHER: Three months. I made those changes when I was there.

Q: Florence was still in Paris.

FISHER: She was still in Paris.

Mrs. FISHER: With our daughter, of course.

FISHER: So I agreed, and we went back, direct transfer to Saigon. I really enjoyed it because it was a job that took every moment of my time. In addition to that, I had supervisory responsibilities for production in Cambodia and Vientiane, plus a laboratory contract operation in the Philippines, where all our laboratory work was done.

When Turner proposed that I be transferred to Saigon, I said, "I will take it on one condition, that you get me Bill Ridgeway out of Korea, transfer him to the Philippines, to Manila, to supervise that laboratory operation." Because Bill was a crackerjack. I knew if I had him there, I'd never have any lab problems. He agreed to it, so Bill was transferred to the Philippines. I would go over every month or so and talk with Bill. He'd come over occasionally to Saigon. It was a good operation.

Heart Attack: 1960—Recuperating at Clark Field Then Back to Washington

I was there until January of 1960. We had had our career Foreign Service examination on January 11, I guess it was, 1960, the written exam. Then on about the 20th, I had some terrible stomach pains. I had stomach pains and I'd been going to the dispensary and they were treating me for an ulcer which they hadn't been able to find. One morning I just couldn't stand it anymore, and I had my driver take me directly to the dispensary. They

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walked me up a flight of stairs and gave me a test, and they discovered I was having a coronary attack. So I never went back. They kept me there for three days and sent me by hospital plane to Clark Air Base.

Mrs. FISHER: I got on that plane.

FISHER: Florence came with me, fortunately. I was there for eight or ten weeks, then transferred back to Washington.

Chet Opal, Then PAO Saigon, Coaches His Staff for Foreign Service Exam

Q: I would like you to tell on tape the brief story you told about Chet Opal, as the PAO, preparing you people for taking the Foreign service exams.

FISHER: Yes. I'll never forget Chet for his offer. When we got notice that the date had been set for the Foreign Service exam, Chet, at a staff meeting, said, "There has to be some question on the Foreign Service exam on American history and other subjects. If you would like, I would be willing to give you a refresher course for one week before the exam from 4:00 to 6:00 in my office for five days." We all said, "Great!" Chet, every day from 4:00 to 6:00, conducted a wonderful refresher course for us all. I would say that the exams had some of those questions. I would say that's probably the reason I passed that exam.

Q: Can you think a similar experience can be attributed to other people who got that training?

FISHER: I'm convinced of that. You know, Chet didn't have to do this. It was a terrific gesture. We were great friends, by the way, in Saigon.

One interesting little aside was, Chet had been brought up in Chicago and among a lot of Jewish friends. Chet was a great appreciator of bagels. Occasionally he would say, "Gee, I wish I had a bagel for Sunday morning."

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Well, Darrell Dance was head of our New York office for the Motion Picture Service, and I wrote Darrell. Fred Kallos used to tell me about the wonderful bagels they baked in his neighborhood. Fred was the chief film librarian up at the New York office of IMS. He lives here, by the way. I said, "Could you get Fred to stop and get a couple of dozen bagels on the way in, pack 'em in a film can, and ship 'em out to me by air?"

About a week later, I got a double film can with a shipping notice that said, "Attention: Alan Fisher. To be opened by Alan Fisher in a darkroom only. BA-GEL Test." (Laughs) They came by air pouch.

I called Chet. I said, "Come on over for breakfast Sunday morning." (Laughs) He came over for breakfast and I sprung the bagels on him.

He said, "Where the hell did you get bagels in Saigon?"

I said, "Fresh out of New York." (Laughs) It was a great experience.

I left Saigon on a hospital plane and never went back. I never did get back there, and I always regret it, not being able to say goodbye to that wonderful staff that I had there. Really, it was a great staff.

Mrs. FISHER: I had to say goodbye to them and pack up everything.

Other Post-tour Reminiscences ReVietnam and Related Experiences

FISHER: Yes. Very talented. All the cameramen got jobs later on during the war as local cameramen for the TV stations, but I felt very guilty when a list of Vietnamese locals was published, with the idea of people sponsoring them in the States, I didn't. I felt very guilty about it, but there was no way I could have done it here. I know some people did, and I give them credit for it, but we never did it. So that ended my Vietnam experience.

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One interesting thing—a number of interesting things, of course, but we were putting out a Vietnamese reel, and yet there was very little Vietnamese music that we could use for the newsreel. Somehow or other, to use Vietnamese stories with Western music under it didn't fit. So I arranged with Pham Dui, who was a musicologist, to do pieces of music for me. What I explained to him, I wanted an attack beginning and an ending, and approximately two minutes in length. I said, “I don't care what music you do, but I want it to be Vietnamese music.” So we made a deal. We would do it one night a week at our recording studio, and he would do eight pieces for me. The cost would be \$80. He played the guitar, but then he would show up with four other musicians playing native instruments, so we got all the native flavor in it. One of the instruments was a native drum, which the drummer tuned by adding or taking off pieces of bread dough on one end of it. (Laughs) Which was fascinating. We got some awfully good music.

My chief local was there always at these sessions, and he would be writing down what type of music it was, and when we'd be making up a newsreel and we'd have a story, I'd say, “You know that piece that went this way, that would be good music for this.” He'd say, “Oh, you can't use this. This is a fishing music and that's rice harvest music.” So I found myself with a lot of specialty music that you had to use only for certain things. But we worked around that and we had some very interesting music. I still have a lot of that stuff on tape. We did that for perhaps a couple of months. We got a good buildup of music, good native music. I doubt that that stuff exists anywhere else.

Q: Probably doesn't. You have this at home?

FISHER: I have it here, yes.

Q: It's obviously lost in Vietnam.

FISHER: I'm sure. All our negatives and everything else were lost in Vietnam. But it was a very interesting thing working with the Vietnamese. They were talented. Every once in a

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while, I would go up to Cambodia and Laos. Hank Miller was PAO Laos at that time, and I remember Hank was telling me about hiring an elephant for an evening, for a cocktail party he was giving. I said, "What does it cost to hire an elephant up here?"

He said, "Well, \$20 for the night plus 20 banana trees." (Laughs)

Q: That was the time Hank had his picture on the cover of Life magazine.

End of interview